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Ray Dies At 70 of Liver Failure

Career criminal denied killing King

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Nashville

James Earl Ray, 70, a career petty criminal who was the convicted killer of legendary civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., died of liver failure yesterday at Columbia Nashville Memorial Hospital.



James Earl Ray

He was serving a 99-year prison sentence for the 1968 slaying after pleading guilty in March 1969 and avoiding a possible death sentence. Ray, who had been in and out of hospitals since

1996 for treatment for liver disease, later recanted his confession, saying he was coerced into pleading guilty.

King was killed by a sniper April 4, 1968, while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. The civil rights leader

JAMES EARL RAY: Page A11 Col. 1

From Page 1

and noted preacher had gone to Memphis to lend his support to striking sanitation workers.

The echoes of that rifle shot ignited rioting in more than 100 cities and seemed to dim the spirit of the entire country, where King had become a leading civil rights figure by winning stunning victories for racial justice through militantly nonviolent means.

Only weeks later, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, D-N.Y., brother of the slain president, was gunned down in the midst of celebrating his victory in the California Democratic presidential primary. To many, the two 1968 slayings marked a watershed in U.S. history.

Ray was an escaped convict with a lifelong list of crimes and a distinct penchant for getting caught. He quickly became a suspect in King's slaying after the gun was traced to him and his fingerprints were found in the room where the shots were fired. The room, in a cheap rooming house across from King's motel, was registered to Ray.

Ray led authorities on a 25,000-mile chase. He drove out of Memphis through police roadblocks; took a bus from Atlanta to Canada, where he got false identification papers; then fled to Britain, Portugal and back to Britain. He was apprehended at London's Heathrow Airport on June 8, 1968, two months after the death of King and on the day of Kennedy's funeral.

He eventually waived extradition and returned to the United States. He fired his first attorney the day before his trial was to begin and instead hired Percy Foreman, the noted Texas trial lawyer.

Foreman persuaded Ray to plead guilty to the shooting, saying that the evidence was overwhelming and that the media already had convicted him. A trial could well end with a death sentence, but a guilty plea would result in a life sentence.

Ray pleaded guilty to murder, got a 99-year prison sentence and, three days later, tried to recant his story. He also began a tortured and disturbed decades-long prison in-

carceration.

Over the years, he was attacked several times by fellow inmates, once receiving 22 stab wounds.

Once, he escaped from Bushy Mountain Prison in Tennessee, eluding authorities for 54 hours before being recaptured in another one of the greatest manhunts in modern memory.

Ray constantly changed his story about the assassination, at times saying he was part of a conspiracy and other times saying he acted alone. By 1974, at his first parole hearing, he said he had not killed King at all. He did not win parole.

Many of those supporting Ray's calls for new trials or investigations were people who really did not like Ray. Civil rights leaders, journalists and congressional investigators questioned whether an inept petty criminal could have masterminded the shooting of King or the subsequent chase that ended in Europe. King's killing eventually took on the air of a possible conspiracy, much as did the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Among those with doubts about Ray and the shooting were the King family. King's widow, Coretta Scott King, recently called for a new trial. Dexter King, one of the Kings' four children, met Ray in 1997 and said he was convinced that Ray did not kill his father. Other doubters included the Rev. Joseph E. Lowery Jr., a founder of the King-led Southern Christian Leadership Conference, who said he never believed Ray was smart enough to mastermind the assassination.

"America will never have the benefit of Mr. Ray's trial, which would have produced new revelations about the assassination," King's widow said.

The King family is pressing Attorney General Janet Reno to create a federal investigative commission with the power to subpoena witnesses, grant immunity and file charges against suspected conspirators.

But as far as Ray and the courts are concerned, it's over. Prosecutors in Memphis, where King was

★★★★ San Francisco Chronicle A11

shot on a motel balcony, said Ray's 30-year battle to take back his guilty plea died with him.

Ray was born in Alton, Ill., and was a high school dropout. He robbed gas stations and stores, served prison sentences in Illinois and nearby Missouri.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

RAY CASE EVIDENCE

Evidence that James Earl Ray killed the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., and Ray's explanations:

■ He pleaded guilty in 1969, avoiding the possibility of the death penalty, and the plea has been upheld in state and federal courts eight times. Ray's answer: He was coerced into making the plea.

■ Ray, a fugitive from a Missouri prison, came to Memphis on April 3, 1968, the day before the killing, and rented a motel room using an assumed name. Several hours before the murder, he used another assumed name to rent a room at a flophouse near the Lorraine Motel, where King was staying. Ray's answer: He was in Memphis to meet with a gunrunner named Raoul and rented rooms at his direction.

■ Ray bought a .30-06 hunting rifle in Alabama and brought it to Memphis. It was found a few hundred feet from the murder scene with his fingerprints on it. It was the type of gun used to kill King, though ballistics tests were not conclusive. Authorities say the shot came from the flophouse

where Ray was staying. Ray's answer: He brought the gun as part of Raoul's gunrunning operation. He gave the rifle to Raoul at the rooming house shortly before the shooting and then went out to run some errands.

■ A small radio with Ray's former inmate number from the Missouri prison was found with the rifle and a bundle authorities say he dropped while fleeing. Ray's answer: The rifle and other items were left outside the flophouse to frame him.

■ Another rooming house resident told police he saw Ray in a hallway seconds after the shooting. Ray's answer: The witness was too drunk to identify anyone.

■ Ray fled Memphis after the shooting and wasn't found until two months later, in England. Ray's answer: He fled in his white 1966 Ford Mustang when he tried to return to the rooming house but found police swarming into the area. He heard on the radio that police were looking for a man driving a white Mustang.

■ The U.S. House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded in 1978 that Ray killed King, perhaps in hopes of collecting a \$50,000 bounty offered by a group of racial bigots in St. Louis. The committee said Ray may have stalked King in Selma, Ala., and Atlanta before coming to Memphis.

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